

Twitter, voice and public libraries

By Mikale Fenton.

Dr. Mary Cavanagh presented her research project "Social-Biblio.ca: Meaning and Method Behind Public Library Micro-Blogging Practices" as part of the School of Library, Archival and Information Studies, the iSchool at UBC's Digital Information Interaction Group (DiiG) lecture series at UBC's Irving K. Barber Learning Center on March 21st, 2013.

Dr. Cavanagh is an associate professor at the University of Ottawa's School of Information Studies where she teaches in areas of organizational change, evaluation of information programs and services, information ethics, and research methods. The focus of her research revolves around the areas of practice-based organizing and managing, the institutionality of the public library, and integrated information management and evaluation. She earned her PhD from the Faculty of Information at the University of Toronto in 2009 and has been published in several journals such as *Library Management*, *Information Research* and the *Canadian Journal of Information Studies*.

Public engagement & social media

For "Meaning and Method Behind Public Library Micro-Blogging Practices," Dr. Cavanagh looked at the ways in which Canadian public libraries engage with the public through Twitter and social media, and how these platforms structure library-client interactions. The project is supported by the Social-biblio platform, a web-platform that represents a curated archive which tracks the official Twitter accounts of 133 public libraries, or 20% of Canadian public library systems.

Dr. Cavanagh's presentation began with a timeline of a selective history of the theories regarding interactions, told first from the information sciences perspective and then through a sociological perspective. This "theory in a nutshell" timeline provided a bit of background into how the notions of agency, structure and practice have been previously

brought together at an abstract level and shaped by various thinkers.

While most social media research tends to focus on individuals, this project decided to look at group organizations by observing the patterns in Twitter conversations between libraries and the public to form a bigger picture about how they interact with one another, and what effect those interactions create. To accomplish this goal, the project measured library-client interactions through a number of "events" as captured by the event's respective hashtag or username. Two examples highlighted in the presentation were [@torontolibrary](#), which referred to the Toronto Public Library's union strike, and #CanLit, a hashtag that trended heavily once it was used in an online chat about Canadian literature hosted by the CBC.

Tracking Twitter chatter

Dr. Cavanagh and her team measured two weeks worth of this "Twitter chatter," and distinguished the differences between the purpose of each tweet as either to provide information, to interact with the public, or to initiate action. The researchers then graphed these distinctions to visualize and identify a continuum of engagement.

Dr. Cavanagh also emphasized the importance for libraries to develop a cohesive voice for their twitter persona to be successful and attract more followers—a hot topic during the discussion period among other public librarians who came to learn how to better develop their center's twitter presence.

To find out more about Dr. Cavanagh and her work, or to see the slides from the presentation, visit <http://mfcavanagh.wordpress.com>.

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